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Investigations sought to define the psychological profile that characterizes militant extremists. In one study, extremist groups were selected to overtly represent a very diverse range of continents, cultures, and political and religious orientations. From the groups' statements, from both print and online sources, 16 themes were identified, interpreted as part of an overarching narrative, and represented in a measure of a fanatical thinking-pattern. Data indicated that typically participants failed to strongly disassociate themselves from the sentiments found in the fanatical items, undercutting the notion that militant extremists have bizarre ideation. In another study, statements available online from contemporary terrorist groups were analyzed linguistically. Key words there used to make survey items, data on which yielded dimensions involving justification and advocacy of violence, violence in the name of God, and blaming Western nations for the world problems. In a follow-up validity study, militant-extremist-thinking measures were administered alongside measures of other relevant constructs to prime samples in the U.S. Relevant data from eight other countries was also obtained and compared. Preliminary results from the validity study moderately link militant-extremist thinking with dogmatism, tradition-oriented religiousness, and some blend of alienation and eccentric experience, although militant-extremist thinking represents a separate, viable new construct.

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militant extremism, terrorism, ideology

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# ***Socio-Psychological Profile of Militant Extremists***

**Final Performance Report for AFOSR FA 9550-06-01-0166**

*prepared by Gerard Saucier, Principal Investigator*

## **Abstract**

See report documentation page, item 14.

## **Comprehensive and Detailed Executive Summary of Significant Work Accomplished**

In this research project, the investigators sought to define, more clearly than in previous research, the psychological profile that characterizes militant extremists. Especially investigated were recurrent features of the thinking pattern (or mindset) of violent militant extremists. Toward the broad *objective* of defining this thinking pattern, two major methods were pursued, both of which built to some degree on previous work by Goran Knezevic (a consultant on this project) and his colleagues.

In the first method, extremist groups were selected to overtly represent a very diverse range of continents, cultures, and political and religious orientations. Statements by (and to some degree statements about) these groups were drawn from both print and online sources. These statements were compared, leading to the formulation of 16 themes common to the militant-extremist mindset. To operationalize this 16-theme model, multiple items were created to represent each of the themes, and administered to samples in the United States and Serbia. The two best items for each theme were selected so as to create a measure of a fanatical thinking-pattern. To investigate the degree to which these themes are endorsed in normal-range populations, distributions of this measure were examined: In both samples the distribution was relatively normal, and typically participants failed to strongly disassociate themselves from the sentiments and framings found in the fanatical items, which undercuts the notion that militant-extremist thinking represents bizarre ideation. The results based on this method indicate that there may be differences in assent to aspects of such thinking based on country, culture, or level of education. Key themes were observed to fit together to construct a strong narrative; in the ideological appeal of salient militant-extremist groups such a compelling narrative may be more important than logical or factual consistency.

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In the second method, the domain of extremist groups was defined based on the list of terrorist groups put forward by the U.S. Department of State. Texts collected from online sources and analyzed linguistically, to produce a set of key words that distinguish terrorist statements from control statements. These key words were represented in an initial set of 132 statements. Factor analysis of these militant-extremist statements in data from participants (N = 452) from Australia, Serbia and USA produced three dimensions: a) justification and advocacy of violence (War factor); b) violence in the name of God (God factor); and c) blaming Western nations for the problems in the world today (West factor). The distributions of scores for the three scales were compared, as were means for the three national samples. As was the case for the measures based on the 16-theme model of militant-extremist thinking (described above), associations with a well-established measure of dogmatism were positive but only moderate in size, indicating that militant-extremist thinking is a separate new construct.

In a follow-up validity study, measures derived based on the two methods were included alongside measures of personality, social attitudes (isms), values, social norms, and perceptions of the degree that one lives in a "failed state" socio-politically, so as to examine the degree of convergence and divergence of such constructs with measures of the militant-extremist thinking pattern. Measures of all these variables were administered to prime samples in the United States (a college-student sample and a community sample). The investigators oversaw the translation of these measures into several other languages (including Spanish, Serbian, Slovak, Byelorussian, Malay, Korean, and Chinese) to facilitate their use in future research. Already, these translations have spurred independent work by investigators abroad who have on their own administered a similar battery of measures to respondents in a total of eight countries (Chile, Guatemala, Serbia, Slovakia, Belarus, Malaysia, Korea, and mainland China), and then generously shared their data with this project's investigators.

Some analyses of validity-study data will be ongoing (in late 2008 or early 2009), in particular those examining the contribution of cross-cultural group differences, and will lead to at least one further publication directly related to the project. But preliminary results indicate that (a) militant-extremist thinking is not predictable from values and social norms, (b) there are significant but relatively small associations with gender (i.e., being male), with aspects of personality (negative emotionality of both internalizing and externalizing types, dishonesty, and introversion), with cynical and ethnocentric attitudes, and with perceiving that one's country is a failed state, but (c) the largest associations are with tradition-oriented religiousness and with new experimental items reflecting a blend of alienation and eccentric experience. None of the aforementioned associations appear to be culture-dependent – they arise even when effects of participants' country of origin are statistically removed from the data. The largest of these associations are still moderate in size, which indicates that the militant-extremist

thinking pattern is a novel construct that is easily distinguished empirically from previous variables emphasized in social, cultural, and political psychology, and in the study of personality. They do suggest, however, that future research must carefully distinguish extremist thinking from traditional-religious thinking rather than confounding the two, and future research should examine the role of eccentricity and alienation in the psychology of militant extremists.

### **Significance and Relevance of This Project**

The psychological basis of engagement in militant-extremist groups is poorly understood. This research has constructed some useful frameworks enabling future research to develop a clearer understanding of how militant-extremist-thinking tendencies manifest and function in human populations. Because militant extremism is a world socio-political problem that this nation must understand so as to address it effectively, this work is consistent with AFOSR's mission to discover, shape, and champion basic science that will profoundly impact the future Air Force. Applications of this research should eventually enable (a) enhanced prediction of the populations and subpopulations in which militant extremism is most likely to arise, (b) effective responses to militant extremism by understanding its characteristic motivations, and (c) greater prevention of militant-extremist violence through public-health-style interventions to discourage development of fanatical-thinking patterns that help spur such violence.

### **Personnel Supported**

Gerard Saucier, Principal Investigator

Lazar Stankov, Co-Investigator

Laura Geuy Akers, Research Assistant

Seraphine Shen Miller, Research Assistant

Goran Knezevic, Consultant

Derrick Higgins, Consultant

### **Publications Directly Related to the Project**

Saucier, G., Akers, L. G., Miller, S. S., Stankov, L., & Knezevic, G. (in press). Patterns of thinking in militant extremism. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Stankov, L., Higgins, D., Saucier, G., & Knezevic, G. (2008). Contemporary militant extremism: A linguistic approach to scale development. Under review at *Political Psychology*.



### **Publications Indirectly Related to the Project**

- Stankov, L. (2008). Conservatism and cognitive ability. Under review at *Intelligence*.
- Stankov, L., & Lee, J. (in press). Dimensions of cultural differences: Pancultural, etic/emic, and ecological approaches. *Learning and Individual Differences*.
- Saucier, G. (in press). Some crucial semantic and linguistic aspects of personality. Invited chapter for P. Corr & G. Matthews (Eds.), *Cambridge handbook of personality*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Stankov, L., & Lee, J. (2008). Culture: Ways of thinking and believing. In G. J. Boyle, G. Matthews, & D. Saklofske (Eds.). *The Handbook of Personality Theory and Testing* (pp. 560-575). London: Sage.
- Saucier, G. (2008). Measures of the personality factors found recurrently in human lexicons. Invited chapter for G. J. Boyle, G. Matthews, and D. Saklofske (Eds.), *Handbook of personality theory and testing: Vol. 2B Personality measurement and assessment* (pp. 29-54). London: Sage.

### **Interactions/Transitions: Presentations at Scientific Meetings**

- Saucier, G., Stankov, L., & Knezevic, G. (2008, January). Patterns of thinking recurrent in fanaticism (Socio-psychological measures of militant extremism II). *Socio-Cultural Modeling Program Review, Air Force Office of Scientific Research, Arlington, VA*.
- Stankov, L. (2008, July). The psychology of terrorism: Explorations into the militant-extremist mindset. *International Congress of Psychology, Berlin, Germany*.
- Stankov, L., & Lee, J. (2008, July). The dimensions of cultural differences among noncognitive domains: Multigroup (etic/emic) analysis. *19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Bremen, Germany*.
- Stankov, L., Saucier, G., & Knezevic, G. (2007, January). Socio-psychological measures of militant extremism. *Socio-Cultural Modeling Program Review, Air Force Office of Scientific Research, Arlington, VA*.
- Saucier, G. (2007, October). The Big Six: A needed upgrade to the Big Five model. *Society of Multivariate Experimental Psychology, Chapel Hill, NC*.
- Saucier, G. (2007, January). Challenging the current paradigm: What lexical studies say about the structure of personality attributes. *Association for Research in Personality, Memphis, TN*.

### **New Discoveries, Inventions, or Patent Disclosures**

- Provisional scales to measure militant-extremist thinking are an innovative product of this project. They are however in the public domain and not patented, thus free to use by all scientists.

**Honors/Awards to Principal Investigator (Gerard Saucier)**

Fellow, American Psychological Society (since 2007)

Cattell Award for outstanding early career contributions, Society of Multivariate  
Experimental Psychology (awarded 1999)

## **Appendix: Data sets developed in the project**

1. Administered a large initial collection of candidate militant-extremism items:
  - a. 215 college students in Oregon
  - b. 52 job applicants in Australia
2. Administered a reduced set of 56 militant-extremism items along with measures of values, social norms, social attitudes (isms dimensions), personality, subjective well-being, alienation and eccentric perceptions, and perceptions regarding whether one's country is a failed state:
  - a. 385 college students in Oregon
  - b. 607 community-sample participants in Oregon

*Note:* Other data sets were developed not by the investigators but rather independently by overseas collaborators, although shared with investigators with permission to examine and analyze them within the scope of this project. These included data from 297 high-school students in Serbia, who were administered the large initial collection of candidate militant-extremism items. Also obtained were relevant data using the 56 militant extremism items and other measures drawn from 232 college students in Serbia, 252 college students in Slovakia, 197 college students in Belarus, 187 college students in Chile, 200 college students in Guatemala, 272 college students in Malaysia, 400 college students in Korea, and 299 college students in China, as well as 415 high-school students in China.